

**KAUSALYA BAISANTRI'S *DOHRA ABHISHAP* : A TREATISE ON  
DALIT WOMEN'S MARGINALISATION**

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**Abstract**

Kausalya Baisantri's autobiography *Dohra Abhishap* (1999) is a notable work by a Dalit woman who brings centre stage the subjugated status of Indian women in our society. Due to their doubly marginalised status, a majority of Dalit women work at different places away from home. Often their earning is snatched by parasitic husbands who do not work at all. She herself is case in point as though she is an educated Dalit woman; she remains a housewife throughout her life and suffers with maltreatment of her husband on one side and caste hatred of caste people on another side. Her autobiography gives a very strong message to women who suffer in society and family and languish forever. The present paper analyses Baisantri's autobiography in the framework of Dalit Literature in India.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Marginal, Gender, Autobiography, Feminism, Suppression.

Kausalya Baisantri's autobiography *Dohra Abhishap* (1999) created a very huge impact in Hindi Dalit literature because it was written by a Dalit woman who expressed her feelings and situation quite openly. The title of her narrative is very significant in denoting the doubly marginalised status of Dalit women as writes Sharmila Rege, "Dalit feminism is limited to educated Dalit women working in universities and white-collared jobs and it questions their knowledge and concern about the material realities of the lives of rural Dalit women" (2000. P.494) and the "split between the educated Dalit women as the spokes-women versus the illiterate dalit women as the listeners is observed by Datar at Dalit women's gathering is underlined and further the women leaders of the feminist movement are graded as more democratic rather than those in the Dalit women's movements" (Ibid.). Kausalya Baisantri, though is an educated Dalit woman but she remains a housewife throughout her life and suffers with maltreatment of her husband on one side and caste hatred of caste people on another side. As Alam has noted with regard to intra-caste patriarchies at work among the oppressed castes, "with the development of the forces of production, the labour and skills of women of OBC and dalit communities have suffered a great downward mobility" and "there is an imposition of moral codes in communities and women and are faced with the threat of retaliation as the basis

of compliance” (1999. P.31), Baisantri’s autobiography describes all she has faced during her strained relationship with her husband and the behaviour of a Dalit who has actively participated in dalit movement. Her work is in line with Susie Tharu’s comment when she opines, “Not a single Dalit woman is either happy or contented from the heart. She is always worried” (1996.p.1313) and Gayatri Chakravorti’s statement that “identities are functions of the ways others construct us” (2002.p.308. as quoted in Gairola). She further adds:

Women identity has great use-value in the schema of gendered society but little exchange value, since gender can never fully be exchanged or reach a point where it establishes an equivalence with another facet of identity as rooted so deeply within both the self and society (subjectivity and agency). Any exchange at all occurs within the gendered subject, who scrambles to compromise her own identity; the bartering of gender roles and other facets of identity is thus an individual, internal, symbolic act never uninformed by the surrounding society. For a subaltern woman this means subordination to the patriarchal codes that constitute her subjectivity, for she must be, to a certain extent, validated by those in power. (p.308)

The autobiography of Baisantri fills a gap in Hindi Dalit literature as it brings centre stage the question of women and focuses more on the patriarchal hegemony within and outside the community in the context of Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general. The need for such works is explained by Smita Patil in these words:

Dalit studies paid scant attention to the question of Dalit women. This is understandable as where a whole community is depressed its primary focus and concern tends to be on the community as a whole rather than on one of its segments even if it is more depressed than the rest of the community. However in the case of Dalits, the women’s issue is important for two reasons. First, many of the expressions of marginalisation of the Dalits are manifested through their women. Second, Dalit women have over the years evolved their own understanding and critique of women’s situation that should constitute a part of Dalit studies howsoever it is understood. (2008.p.142)

Most of erstwhile works were in Marathi namely *Jeena Amucha* by Baby Kamble (1990) and *Antasphot* by Kumud Pawde (1995). These works expressed well the epistemological and ontological situation of their existence in India in addition to Mukta Salve’s essay “*Mang Maharachya Dukhavisatha*” (1985). No doubt there are feminist shadows in the writing of dalit males but their works lack legitimacy in representing women’s issues in first person narrative. Kancha Ilaiah writes:

Dalit women are democratised due to their communitarian background and do not have the gendered lack of other caste women. But, mere shifting from the private to the public domain does not imply that they are liberated from the matrix of patriarchy. However, these questions need to be addressed in an open ended manner rather than focus on the essentialism of their identities. Is a Dalit woman really more liberated than other women? Or is it the legitimate caste-Hindu structural society which forces Dalit women to be in an oppressive system and suppresses their voices? Or did poverty and the question of livelihood push them to remain silent in the constructs of patriarchy.(as qtd. in Ahmed, 2008: 146).

Her autobiography is a valuable contribution to unravel these complexities of the structures of subjectivity of Dalit women in north India. The incessant and unending effort of her parents in upbringing her siblings are an example of how women’s education is hated in Dalit

community and how Dalit men put obstacles in their path of self-assertion. The patriarchal structure is more or less the same as caste people and thus she finds herself ‘doubly cursed’ in the social setup. Though Dalit men are struggling hard for their place and respect in Indian society, when it comes to women, their attitude is similar to others and they take women as their property or a slave who should obey them at any cost as she writes in the Preface:

I am neither a writer nor a litterateur. But being born as an untouchable what I had to endure psychologically left an indelible impact on my mind. I have written my experience with open heart. The male dominated society does not like openness in women. The husband is looking for pretexts to blame his wife of loose character for her openness.

My sons, brothers and husband can be angry upon me but I need freedom to express my opinion before the society. Other women might have similar experience like me and have suppressed their voice due to fear of family and live in angst throughout their life. Such experience must come before all to open the eyes of society. (Baisantri.2012.p.8.All translation of text mine)

She begins her narrative by giving details of her family, her life and childhood. How due to lack of resources her mother has to clean her hairs with clay, how her family lives with meagre earning of her parents, how they use broken part of rice (*khuddi*) for food as it is cheap. Her mother often curses herself for giving birth to five daughters as female child was not liked in any Indian family. Five of her siblings die due to various diseases and dearth of health facilities nearby. The economic status of her parents becomes evident by her description at the beginning. She also writes how clay and cow-dung is used to cover broken walls and this work was only done by daughters or females.

When Baisantri is admitted to school she has no means to iron clothes. She keeps clothes under her pillows whole night so that it becomes wearable. Her family eats beef as it is cheap and is available in nearby Muslim butcheries. Her parents teach them strict work culture that makes them uneasy without work. She uses all her time spared from studies in cooking food, picking firewood and fruits from nearby graveyard made for Anglo-Indians. Several lentils and lettuce like *charota*, *Patur* etc were picked for cooking as vegetables are not affordable to them. Her mother often becomes emotional when she combs their hairs at their hardships in upbringing them. She often remembers her own mother who suffered more than her due to illiteracy, male dominance and bore with so much suffering and torment as a female in her community, how she was married in her infancy and became a widow in adolescence. She also describes how untouchability is practiced and the Dalits labour hard to make their ends meet:

They were able to manage food grains anyhow for two meals a day. Both males and females used to work in fields...untouchably was practiced very harshly and thus they could not get job in caste households. Only the job of cutting wood and porting heavy good was for them. A painful job was their share often. (Baisantri, 2012:15-16, All translation of the text is mine)

She brings the question of women’s suppression centre stage right at the outset with the story of Aaji (mother’s mother) who suffered without any mistake in her own dalit community. Be it a Mang woman or a Mahar, the story remains the same and women are forced to accept the false beliefs and customs. They have no choice in choosing their husband and later their husbands thrash them repeatedly at their will and practice polygamy. How her Aaji was seen as unlucky after her husband’s death and how she was brought to her second husband’s house at night after her ‘paat’ is another example of those customs that support male ego. As she was a

‘paat’ wife, she had no right to participate in any pooja or marriage, “As she was brought at night to her husband’s house, no married women could see a ‘paat’ woman. She could not take part in any marriage or puja. Her necklace had an inscribed figure of a woman which indicated she is a ‘paat’ and other should know it. The widowers could marry and virgin but a widow couldn’t. (p.17)

Ultimately her Aaji was married to Modku ji as he was comparatively rich and lent money to others. He already had a wife but her opposition had got no importance before his male urge. Even the suitor’s appearance was never put into consideration. Modku ji was very black in comparison with Aaji. When she reached Modku ji’s house his first wife and all chided her and waylaid her time and again. She worked for day long and never complained to anyone. When her own children Bhagirathi (writer’s mother) and Shravan were ignored she was forced to go to Nagpur as her suppression had become unbearable. Her husband never sympathised with her and misbehaved with her children. Her son Shravan never returned to his native place as he hated his father. Unluckily he died of typhoid at the age of eighteen. By this time Bhagirathi was 13 and the question of her marriage made her Aaji anxious. Here also her husband came to trouble her and without consulting her fixed her daughter’s marriage with someone in his relation. Her Aaji had no say in it. Anyhow the marriage was averted due to Modku ji’s anger.

Baisantri’s description of her Aaji and her suffering in her own community gives us an introductory preface about the life of dalit women and their situation. The next generation is Baisantri’s mother who luckily finds a good husband but suffers the ire of dalit men and caste men both because she has decided to educate her children at any cost. The third generation is the writer herself who, though educated enough, comes to experience a dalit woman’s situation in this society as well as with her husband who is an IAS. In spite of his being a dalit and an educated person, his behaviour to women is no different from the feudal mindset of caste men. The title of her autobiography becomes evident here as it is entitled “*Dohra Abhishap*” which means doubly cursed. It is here she begins her own story. Born on 08/09/1926 in Khalasi line of Nagpur she describes the superstitions rampant in dalit community from where her life began. She writes:

Some rituals and tantra were performed just after my birth...I was moved to and fro five time over a pattal from the Brahmin’s house. They felt Brahmin to be a high person, Godlike perhaps. Today I feel shameful of the whole episode. (p.28)

Her Aaji used to work whole day as a daily labourer, her mother has been a daily wage worker in Empress Mill, her father works in a bakery and her elder sisters take care of her in her infancy while they are away. They do not have a day’s leave as it would result in loss of wages. Due to prevalence of diseases, her family members perform many rituals and visit religious places for her health. She still remembers her Aaji’s death as she was a symbol of endurance for her:

Aaji suffered a lot for me but she could not live long to see my development. She died when I was barely of ten months. She vowed to pay obeisance on the feet of Vithoba in Pandharpur for my health and went there alone barefooted. (p.29)

Dalit community is itself divided in many sub-castes and they practice untouchability with other Dalits. She exemplifies the relation of Mangs who regard Mahars as untouchables. Similar is the treatment with Bhangi’s or sweepers as she writes, “The people of Mang practiced

untouchability with the Mahars and did not drink water touched by them. They threw the food and water brought by them. Their women did the job of maid-servants and cleaned the dirty clothes of infants. Mahars used to play instruments made of hide skin in marriages” (p.31). Marriage is not practiced among sub-castes. Her own sub-caste is Kosre and it is very difficult to find a suitor for her and her sisters as very few children study and get education. Her elder sister is married when she is studying in class VIII. No one is ready to listen to her and she could not study further. Her mother repents for her whole of her life.

Her student life in Bhide Kanyashala introduces her to various facets of untouchability rampant in Hindu society. The economic difference of caste people and Dalits is also evident in her description of social status, “I didn’t open my lunch box before the girls. I was shameful of opening my lowly lunch box and lowly food and used to eat facing the wall so that anyone doesn’t see me. I felt hungry at the fragrance of their food and used to think when I will have that lunch in my life.”(p.41) Not only the caste people despise them but also the Kunbi’s who are Dalits themselves. She comes to know the various sub-castes in Dalits and is fearful of getting her caste revealed to her classmates who belong to kunbi community. The fear she experiences when she visits a Kunbi home reveals the abyss of caste identity and she wants to return to her home before someone recognises her. She points to the fact how caste hatred and *varna* system has percolated to Dalits and it is only because of this reason they are divided among themselves:

I felt shameful that I was an untouchable and due to this I felt very weak...I passed my time in loneliness during interval and before the opening of the school...The Kunbi girls asked my caste. Out of fear I told them I was a Kunbi. They asked if I was a Tilele or a Kaire... I replied I was a Tilele... I had concealed my caste from them but I was fearful of its revelation. (P.41-42)

When she is merely in class IV she experiences alienation from the Brahmin girls who despise her because of her lowly clothes and blame her of stealing their books. Her teacher punishes her and no one is ready to listen to her that she hasn’t done it. Difference in food habits is also revealed to her as Brahmins do not use castor oil for cooking food, rather they use mustard or ghee for this purpose. She also understands the poor economic condition of her parents who are unable to pay the fees of her children. She is deeply moved to remember it and is revengeful of those who made this unjustified *varna* order, “My mother-father had no means to pay our fees. Baba entreated the Head Mistress that he could not give the fees of his children. Any how she agreed but warned us if our results are not good she would remove us all from the school. Baba bowed his head before the Head Mistress from a distance as he could not touch her feet as he was an untouchable...Tears came out of my eyes and I become moved if I remember those days. I feel humiliated and I want to scratch the face of those who made this caste system. I wish to take revenge of our dishonour.”(p.47). She gives the credit of her education to her father and mother who in spite of their economic depravity made them continue their studies. The call of Dr. Ambedkar in Kasturchand Park, Nagpur has motivated them towards it and they continue their headlong struggle to make children educated either by pawning the meagre jewels they have or contributing in chit funds. Her mother has much difficulty in getting kerosene for the oil lamps they had. Sometimes she or her brother stands in long queues to get it. Her mother arouses them at 6 am in morning to get ready for school. The food grains of ration office were of very bad quality. Instead of whole rice, *khuddi* was in their fate. It was boiled and was eaten with *mattha* or curd. Tea was made occasionally when somebody arrived from outside.

The description of her sister’s condition after marriage unfolds the general situation of women in a male dominated society as she writes, “My sister gave birth to children every second year, first

a daughter was born, then three sons. All three died of illness. She gave birth to eleven children and most of them suffered from illness. They were unable to afford the fees of doctors and medicines. It was a pathetic situation” (p.51) Even her mother gave birth to eleven children. She was pained to see that only six daughters and one son survived among them. More value to male child was everywhere. When her brother was born, her mother distributes sweets to her neighbours. They regard women and daughters as useless. Her inferiority complex bars her from participating in sports and games, in co-curricular activities & debates. She can play good kho-kho and kabaddi but the feeling of being a dalit catches her. Even she is fearful of drinking water from their water pot. The teachers of her school are not interested in the upliftment of Dalits except Mr. Khare who teaches her and encourages her. When he meets her later he is happy to know that they have secured college degree. There is no respect for the poor. No one has an iota of feeling that they do that much of work before coming to school.

Even the people of her own community do not like their study and despise her family. Same is the case with her relatives. They conspire with their neighbours to trouble their parents, throw stones during Ganpati festival and her parents console them on such occasions not to become annoyed and continue their study. Some dalit youths spy on them and frame pretexts to defame them. Some of them even write abuses on their walls but her parents would never lose their balance. The caste people comment on them as, “See, a Harijan Bai is going. See her pride, her father is a beggar but she rides a cycle” (p.60-61). The caste women laugh at them and expressed their wonder how daughters of a dalit could study in a school. The dirty gazes of men linger on them wherever they go. Once she foils an attempt of seduction by a gatekeeper of a hospital where her brother is admitted in illness. Thus there is lack of assistance and support for women.

The teachings of Dr. Ambedkar inspire them to achieve education and adopt cleanliness. Some Dalits are continuously engaged in eradication of untouchability but a lot of effort is needed to achieve it completely. She actively takes part in those plays to make people aware of it in different *bastis* but due to lack of support she could not continue it. There is no concept and understanding of cleanliness in and around her basti as she writes:

When I came from Sitabardi I didn't want to enter our *basti*. One had to move through human excreta. Children were seen defecating. All the area was covered with it. The houses were just before it and one could only see human excreta at all sides...only three latrines were there for such a big *basti*...tapeworm and ringworms had infested the place...women would defecate outside at night... bad smell filled the air. (P.68-69)

It is only due to lack of education among Dalits. Dalits consume the meat of dead animals even though it is unhygienic and fleas sit on it. There is no value of the work of dalit women and many of the Dalits do not work at all. They are parasites on the earnings of their women. The Jayram-Ramkunwar episode is a good example of this. Different moral standards are for men and women. Women are regarded symbols of family prestige and men blame women for all. They beat them on pretexts of working and talking with other men. Sakharam's wife suffers the ire of males at the behest of her husband when she is found talking to a labourer, “Sakharam's wife was brought outside after some time. She had worn only a *choli* and a small cloth. A white *bindi* was attached on her forehead and a garland of *chappals* was put in her neck. They moved her in the basti on an ass. The people of the basti moved her outside amid noise and furore. ‘O' God!’” (p.72-73). These circumstances torment her and she is bent upon becoming educated and work for the education of her community and especially women who are doubly deprived. Her involvement with the Dalit movement introduces her to other realities of a Dalit's life. During

Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations she actively takes part in it and informs people about the teachings and works of Ambedkar. His visit to Bhandara, Umvede, Khadakpur and Chandrapur makes her an ardent worker of Dalit Movement. It is in the meeting of Unnao she meets Devendra, her future husband, who is doing D. Litt from BHU, Varanasi. He belongs to Bihar and has contributed some essays on the dalit cause in dalit magazines.

Her marriage with Devendra on 16 Nov, 1947 brings her to Varanasi. Her married life reveals the behaviour of her husband towards her and his own siblings in a few months and she starts thinking how people live in duplicity and hypocrisy. Her husband, though an ardent worker of dalit cause, is a rude fellow who has feudal mindset towards women and their rights. He does not take care of even his own brother and sisters and never seeks any suggestion in his affairs. He does not even care for her. He regards women as slaves:

He put his sisters in the house and didn't send them to school. I wanted to ask why he had stopped their education but couldn't lest he would think I didn't like them here. Devendra never asked for any suggestion from me in the affairs of the house... I came to realise that he had no regard for anyone's feeling and wishes. (p.100)

When she accompanies him to Nirsa where Devendra is posted as a Labour Inspector she comes to know that the information about their caste has reached before their arrival. The caste employees despise them and avoid eating with them and shamelessly talk about their caste. Their experience in Asansol is more or less the same. A Brahmin clerk conspires against her husband and conceals all the official letters to be posted. When Devendra enquires for it, those are found in his closet. Devendra suspends him for his behaviour but the clerk starts begging for his mercy. She understands that caste pride works till one is safe, but as soon as one is in danger, he succumbs down and all pride vanishes like a bubble. During this interim, her relationship with Devendra remain one sided as for him women are only a means of physical pleasure and made to do household work. He behaves as if she is an unpaid labourer as she writes:

Devendra Kumar needed a wife only for satisfying his physical needs and making his food. He bothered only for his office work. He never cared for what I needed. I never interfered in his office work nor did I ever oppose him. Children were small and I was busy in household jobs... Devendra Kumar kept his money in his safe and gave it for milk and vegetables daily after counting. Often he forgot and one had to remind him...If I asked money for my clothes and chappals he tried hard to postpone it for the next month. The next month he quarrelled with me and would run to hit me. Later I stopped talking to him because he often spoke abuses. (p.104)

On various pretexts he blames her and her family for their marriage and when her children favour her, he waylays his sons as well. His behaviour with his children was often strained. The attitude of an educated Dalit on a very high post has been exposed by Kausalya Baisantri. It is strange that a person who has worked for Dalits and their rights can't even grant women a share in the decisions of his family and forgets his past. The miserly nature of Devendra is another facet of his personality as Baisantri describes:

My husband has got bronze certificate of freedom fighter and the government has praised his work. But the same man would fight with his wife. He neither praised his wife nor gave any penny to her, even if she did all his household work. He stopped giving the allowance of forty rupees decided by him. I stopped going for milk and carrying bags as I had to wait for ration and milk

for many hours. I was ailing with arthritis and so I had stopped washing clothes. By this time the maid servant used to do this. He could not bear this and sent her back. He would often say that he has no obligation for her and would ask me to go out of the house. A freedom fighter saw his own wife no better than a maid servant. (p.106)

Devendra is a prototype of countless irresponsible men who are unable to free themselves of their feudal mindset in which wife is only a doll who should remain mute, succumbing and caged in household jobs. Their pride in being the bread earner is evident in most of their actions. The insensitive and uncaring nature of her husband is revealed when Baisantri is pregnant and Devendra is busy with his official tours to various places in Madhya Pradesh. Devendra has no time to spare for his wife when she is admitted in a hospital for childbirth. His payment of thirty rupees when more than two hundred is required proves the fact how insensitive and miserly he is. His office assistant manages the needed money for her. The disgust at such base treatment at the hands of one's husband is intolerable for Baisantri. The anger and resentment of the writer results in filing a request for divorce later as she concludes to lead an independent life free from the clutches and pangs of such relationship where there is no warmth in life.

Kausalya Baisantri concludes from her own life that whenever suppression of Dalits and the poor is happening, the women suffer most and so utmost preference should be given to the women's question. A majority of Dalit women work at different places and due to their mobility their children are unable to study. Even wages are decided and given at the mercy of their employers. Often their earning is snatched by parasitic men who do not work at all. If women want to prosper, they should strive for self-respect by standing on their feet and move forward. They will have to develop strength in them rather than taking help of others. Her autobiography is thus a very strong message to women who suffer in society and family and languish forever.

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